

GOING HOME

Tension had already gripped Janet before the train pulled away from the platform of Herne Bay station. Now, as it laboured up the long incline, excitement and anxiety mounted with each click of the rails and throb of the persistent locomotive. There was no doubt! She was going home!

She looked out of the window, trying to calm herself. The train was passing along a high embankment and she studied the diminutive bungalows and houses, the neat, green, lawns and dry, grey, roads, searching for a house like theirs. She looked for people, but saw none. It seemed quite dead and just as she was wondering whether it could be a Bank Holiday and everyone was down at the seaside, the ground rose swiftly and the train was in a cutting.

Her eyes flashed up to the map on the compartment wall, seeking confirmation of the fact she knew so well, that she had rehearsed so well, about which there could be no doubt. Birchington was the next station. A fresh wave of excitement fell upon the gravelled shores of her senses. She rehearsed again. The walk from the station was accomplished in a flash and she was standing indoors, in her kitchen. Yet, as she surveyed with calm and confidence the familiar domestic scene, she realised something had been neglected in the scenario. Somehow, somewhere between the station and the kitchen, in her mind, there was a black hole, a gap, something omitted, overlooked and forgotten.

Her thoughts ran on, over the well worn beach. They presented the same problems and she provided the same, sparse, answers. Would the children remember her? How long was it, then, since they had last seen her, or she them? Would the house be exactly as she remembered it? And the garden? Nigel had told her that it had not changed a great deal; that the roses she planted had flourished to maturity; that the clematis, a present from her mother, had died. Now, what would they do? Would they have a small party as a celebration? Invite the neighbours? Were they the same? She had not checked this with Nigel, and he had not mentioned them. Then there was the car. They could go out, to Canterbury and Ashford, Dover and Deal. She had not been in the car.

The pebbles on this shore were well worn, turned, examined, familiar. Each time she had let the tides of her mind seep through this path she had asked the same questions but now, in sharp focus, there was a profound difference. This time it was real. She was going home! Yet, as she settled, content, reassured and slightly snug, a cold icy wind blew in from that distant and fathom-less region of her mind, a black zone where she dared not probe or venture. That something, forgotten, to be left alone, dwelt there, always there.

She sighed and almost as if he were making a response, the man opposite coughed. Janet started. She had been so preoccupied with her thoughts that she had barely given him a moment's notice. She now settled her concentration on him and scrutinised his features. He was in his mid-forties, she thought. Balding, bespectacled, his chin bore a prominent mole which he seemed to be in the habit of rubbing at regular intervals. His eyes, pinching the bridge of his hooked nose, were too close together for him to be trusted, and his mouth was thin and weak. He was not the sort of man she would readily trust, she thought.

He was looking hard at her and, perturbed by his attention, she turned again to look out of the window. What might he do for a living? He was well dressed. An accountant, bank manager, teacher, in insurance? He might even be a dentist or a doctor. Her heart suddenly took a series of gigantic bounds. But why? Why should she be concerned at the thought that this man might be a doctor or a dentist? Why?

The train gathered speed over the marshes. She turned her thoughts to the children. Betsy would be over twelve now, and John, ten. She had seen the photographs of them taken at Bournemouth last summer. They were not taken on the sands, but up among the cool pines, Betsy

looking sad, struggling for a smile, but that was Betsy, though, undemonstrative, introverted, a little tragic.

Janet was suddenly conscious of the fact she had brought them no presents. She must take something home with her, no matter how small and insignificant. There was a small amount of money still in her purse. She would stop at the newsagent's and buy some Quality Street chocolates, always a family favourite. She would do that!

Houses appeared outside the window, at first only one or two, then more as the train slackened speed, heralding the presence of Birchington. Janet started up, her eyes darting from roof to roof. Their house was there, somewhere. Impulsively she snatched the small valise from the luggage rack, fumbled with the compartment door, and stumbled on her high heels into the corridor. The train had stopped. Janet struggled to open the door and split a finger nail on the immovable window. The ticket collector came to her aid, opening the door and she half fell, forward onto the platform, dazzled by the brightness of the sunlight.

"Are you all right, lady?" asked the ticket collector, taking her arm, aware of her distress and confusion. Janet bowed her head, swallowed, and nodded.

"If I can just sit down for a moment," she whispered. A shadow fell, cold, across her and, looking up, she saw it had been cast by the man from the compartment. His hooked nose leered and his mouth thinned and rippled, but he said nothing. Agitated, she shut her eyes but, in escaping from him, Janet found herself confronted and trapped by a new image which gripped her with terror. In that instant, the gates of the black zone, where her consciousness had dared not enter, had been flung open. The inlying, inky blackness had oozed outwards and shaped itself into a distinct, menacing, form. It was a woman, another woman - the other woman!

The alarm bells were ringing and the sirens were shrieking as the tidal wave swept through and submerged her scrambling thoughts. Consciousness and sanity seemed to be slipping away when her husband's voice reached out, calm and reassuring. "She has gone, the woman. She is not there anymore. You have nothing and no-one to fear, I promise you. We all want you home. Trust me, trust me." Janet opened her eyes and relaxed her tightly clenched hands. She ought to trust him. She had to trust him. She had no alternative. She had burned her boats and abandoned her accommodation. She had bought a single ticket. There was no turning back.

The ticket collector was still addressing her. "Are you sure that you are all right, lady?" he repeated. She smiled weakly and nodded.

"It was nothing," she said. "It has passed now."

"I can fetch you a glass of water?" Janet shook her head, found her ticket, and made her way up the slope and out of the station. The familiarity of the surroundings blanketed her, reassured her, and underwrote her confidence. Little had changed and in less than four minutes she would be home. Mr Evans served her himself. He probably did not remember her at first when she asked for the confectionery and looked away, down in her purse for the money. When she looked up again she realised that he was standing, on the other side of the counter, staring at her strangely. Had he recognised her? Out of the corner of her eye she saw his wife appear in the doorway to the rear of the shop. Evans looked towards his wife, then took the money from Janet in total silence.

Concerned and bewildered, she went out of the shop and nearly turned the wrong way, back towards the station. Was Nigel being honest with her? Did the Evans's glances mean anymore that just "Oh, she's back again, then? About time, too!" Surely Nigel would not have asked her home, all this way, if he had not been telling her the truth? He could not have been that cruel, that heartless. There was no going back, she reminded herself. She had never been this far before.

As she rounded the corner into the road, the sweet scent of lilac caught her attention and happy memories of her early days of marriage flooded back, memories of times too often

forgotten and discounted, times before it went wrong. It was an omen. It was there as a sign to tell her that everything would work out, this time.

She neared the house and her heart leapt. Two children were in the front garden, playing. They were Betsy and John, surely? They must be! She was sure that she recognised them from the photographs. Strangely, they were not standing, waiting, but appeared to be - now she was closer they appeared to be gardening. Perhaps they were not expecting her? Perhaps Nigel had not told them but was keeping her going home a secret, a wonderful surprise!

At the front gate Janet put down her valise and leaned over. "Hello," she said. "Hello, I'm" She stopped. Perhaps she should not say that, not yet. The word "mother" sounded alien and formal, and how would they have addressed the other woman? The two children were now standing, staring intently at her, searching her features, silent, probing. Surely they must recognise her? Surely? But no sign of recognition was forthcoming. Janet faltered. This was not how it was meant to be!

She opened the gate and started boldly up the path. She had reached half way when the front door was opened. Expecting Nigel, Janet smiled, but the smile froze when, in the deep, recessed, shade, she saw the form of a woman appear, barring her way into her house. Darkly, Janet seemed to see her own image mirrored there.

Evans's bag fell to the path, bursting and scattering the sweets across the concrete and into the flower beds. With a tearful cry, Janet fled, running recklessly back the way she had come. Near the station she paused for breath and looked back. No-one appeared to be following her, but they would come. Wiping the tears onto the back of her hand she tried to gather her wits. Survival now was the one thing. She had to escape, to get away, but where? As she sought her handkerchief it dawned on her that she had left the valise behind by the gate. What little she possessed was lost. Except she still had some money in her purse.

At the station she discovered that the next train was due, going to Ramsgate. She bought a ticket and went on to the platform. This was cunning, she told herself, because they would expect her to go back up the line, back the way she had come. To her relief she could see the train approaching and she walked hurriedly along the platform to meet it.

The locomotive had nearly reached the end of the platform when she glanced behind her. There, not fifty feet away, was the ticket collector and the man with the mole. Panic engulfed her. She was trapped, but in the instance of her recognition of her fate Janet's mind identified, processed and concluded upon her last means of escape. The man with the mole was waving his arms, running, shouting, but his words were lost in the gushing roar of the locomotive as it thundered into the station. Wretchedly, yet calmly, Janet stepped from the platform.

Death should have been instantaneous, Janet told herself. It was not so. In an eternity of agony, the locomotive seems to scorch over her frail body, its breath tearing at her clothes and limbs. A number of objects seemed to strike her and pin her firmly to the sleepers. An unimaginable pain seared into her arm, paralysing her nerves and, with her husband's name on her lips, the long awaited darkness descended.

"I am dreadfully sorry to bring you all this way," said Dr Menzies, nervously fingering the prominent mole on his chin. "I really thought we'd succeeded this time. She was asleep, in that chair, when, just before you arrived, she relapsed, went berserk, and ran from the house down into the copse. We caught her, but I'm afraid we had to sedate her before she harmed herself. It's a dreadfully sad case, but still not without hope. If we can only get the level of the medication right. We shall keep on trying."

Nigel picked up the small valise that he had carefully packed that morning before kissing the children. "Don't worry, Janet, love," he whispered into the ear of his now peaceful wife. "We want you. We all do. You will be with us again, maybe soon. Next time, I promise you, you're going home."

THE END

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